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CIA Impact on Foreign Policy

By Marquis Childs

THIS IS an anniversary most of us would like to forget. It was just two years ago that President Eisenhower returned from Paris after being subjected by Premier Khrushchev to the violent and humiliating attack that blew up the long-awaited summit meeting.

That was the aftermath of the shooting down of the U-2 espionage plane 1300 miles inside the Soviet Union. And the disaster to the U-2, with the capture of the pilot, Francis Gary Powers, set in motion a chain of consequences only dimly understood in the two years that have passed.

Ever since World War II a mysterious element called "intelligence" has figured in American policy decisions. A huge intelligence apparatus has come into being. While part of this apparatus is exposed to public view, as in the big headquarters that the Central Intelligence Agency has built on the Potomac River near Washington, the mysterious reports of the CIA and military intelligence are always shrouded in secrecy.

Despite efforts to cut it back and coordinate it on the military side, there is a strong suspicion that the intelligence tail has more often than not wagged the policy dog. A look backward at intelligence evaluations on which presumably major decisions have been based raises substantial doubt as to whether this overbalancing influence is wise.

THE MARGIN of error seems always to have been on the optimistic side. This goes from the estimate of when the Soviet Union would obtain the atomic bomb, a misjudgment of anywhere from 6 to 20 years, depending on the intelligence source, to the Cuban fiasco and the informed conviction that the landing of 1200 Cuban patriots at the Bay of Pigs would touch off a successful uprising against Fidel Castro.

It certainly covers the latest events in Southeast Asia. Largely through the machinations of the CIA, a "strong man," Phoumi Nosavan, was put in power in Laos. He has proved to be strong chiefly in pressing very large demands on the United States. As recently as a year ago or less military intelligence was touting the Royal Laotian Army as an effective military force. While disillusion seems to have set in, there is no reason to wonder whether anyone was prepared for the flight from Nam Tha led by the Royal Laotian generals.

The answer of the CIA to its own successes must necessarily be kept secret while their failures are advertised to the world. But, if the successes cannot be known, surely something can be learned from the disasters. A book just published, "The U-2 Affair" by David Wise and Thomas B. Ross, breaks through official secrecy and the wrappings of the official coverup to show how little the President or anyone else in high authority actually controlled the operation and how disastrous were the consequences growing out of the bungled way in which the affair was handled once the plane was reported missing.

The CIA's answer is that the mosaic of photographs of the Soviet Union made in the four or five years before the U-2 was downed more than compensate for the final tragedy. But any effect this operation may have had on policy is undetectable. The authors of "The U-2 Affair" say that policy-makers at the top had lost genuine control of the program by the spring of 1960 and functionaries determined to get "just one more" were in charge. They reach the following sober conclusion:

"THERE IS NO substantiated evidence of any sort of conspiracy to scuttle the summit. But it is clear that many important persons in the intelligence field were more concerned with the U-2 as a valuable instrument of espionage than with its possible effect on the summit."

The CIA has virtually completed the move from Washington to the new building that rises like a big white cliff on the Potomac. How many employes are housed there is, of course, secret. But it can be stated that the building has one million square feet of floor space, making it a little less than a third the size of the Pentagon. Yet the CIA is retaining its headquarters building in Washington. Thus the intelligence tail, judging from the few external glimpses permitted, appears to be growing larger rather than smaller.

Whether it will wag the policy dog in appraising the perilous and uncertain power balance between Russia and China in southeast Asia is a profoundly disturbing question.